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## Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

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**The five-paragraph essay format often puts students' thinking in a box. There's a better way.**

*"We must teach the five-paragraph format! Students need a starting place when writing essays."*

*"They need the formula to do well on standardized tests."*

*"We need to be sure kids are prepared for college writing."*

The defense of the five-paragraph formula was strident among the secondary English teachers to whom I was presenting on writing and the Common Core State Standards—and trying to make the case against relying on this formula. Ironically, hanging on the wall was the diagram of the formula—a triangle represented the introductory paragraph with the thesis statement as the concluding sentence, three rectangles represented the evidence paragraphs, and an inverted triangle showed that the fifth paragraph begins by repeating the thesis, then builds out for the conclusion.

Having taught the five-paragraph formula to high school students, I recognize its appeal. It appears to offer a way into writing for students who need help in organizing their thoughts. As I sat down to write this article for *Educational Leadership*, I found myself wishing for a formula I could turn to to help me organize my thinking—to find a way in.

But this is the problem with the five-paragraph formula; its offer of structure stops the very thinking we need students to do. Their focus becomes fitting sentences into the correct slots rather than figuring out for themselves what they're trying to say and the best structure for saying it.

Brandon, a student I taught in the years when I relied on the formula, reminded me of this as I talked with him about the essay he was composing on Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Lippincott, 1937). I asked him how it was going. He replied, "Well, I have my first paragraph, with my thesis, but I may need to change it because I have five or six examples and I only need three."

Susan, who sat behind him, was concerned because she couldn't find enough examples for her thesis. When I suggested she revisit her thesis, she replied, "But I already have my introductory paragraph written. I don't want to start over." Susan was still working through her understanding of the text, but her focus was on using the formula to get finished with the writing.

As I read the essays these juniors had written on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I saw no evidence of the rich discussions—even debates—I'd heard in class about the choices the main character makes regarding relationships, about the book's ending, or about Hurston's choices as a writer (such as the use of dialect). Their essays were sentences slotted into a formula. Organization was evident, but thinking was not. I had to check for students' names because there was no evidence of their personal voices.

## What's Wrong with the Formula?

I'm not alone in my concern about the effects of relying on the five-paragraph formula. Thirty years of research indicate that this formula doesn't serve students well. Let's consider some of the problems.

*Reliance on the formula keeps students from developing the thinking and organizational skills they need to support their writing.* The formulaic approach actually hinders students from freely probing their own thoughts and interpretations about a text, from getting to what one critic of this approach calls, "the rich chaotic mess from which true insight and thoughtfulness can emerge" (Wiley, 2000, p. 64). Often, the formula becomes a stopping point instead of a starting point. According to Kimberly Wesley (2000), its "emphasis on organization over content squelches complex ideas that do not fit neatly into three boxes" (p. 59).

*It doesn't ensure success on standardized tests—or in college.* The increased prevalence of the five-paragraph formula has been linked to standardized writing assessments. Yet some studies find that although students who rely on this formula earn passing scores on standardized writing assessments, they do not earn the highest scores (Albertson, 2007; National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). Other studies have raised concerns about how standardized assessments themselves lead to writing instruction that "engenders vacuous writing" (Hillocks, 2002, p. 114) and fails to prepare students for the writing skills they'll need in college and beyond (Argys, 2008; Wesley, 2000).

College instructors complain that the five-paragraph formula leads to "bland but planned essays" (Nunnally, 1997, p. 69). First-year writing courses often focus on unteaching the formula (Courtney, 2008; Fanwetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese, 2010), and most college writing assignments are far longer than five paragraphs. Wesley (2000) notes how a red flag went up for her when a student writing a comparative analysis essay on two novels asked, "But how can I fit seven pages into five paragraphs?" (p. 58).

*It reinforces a deficit model of education.* This is the most troubling effect—the belief that certain students need this formula because of their limited writing skills. Teachers in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Writing Project Collaborative describe their concerns about the negative impact of the formula for all students, but particularly for students perceived as struggling writers:

*Students learn that writing means following a set of instructions, filling in the blanks. Such writing mirrors working-class life, which requires little individual thinking and creativity combined with lots of monotony and following orders .... Writing ... should not be yet another way to train students to be obedient citizens." (Brannon et al., 2008, p. 18)*

## Going Beyond the Formula

So if teachers don't use the five-paragraph formula, what can we do instead? How can we help students write essays that show thinking and organization? To prepare students for writing, teachers need to provide them with structures that support students' deep thinking *while* they read the texts they'll write about and with opportunities to explore their ideas through low-stakes writing before they craft their polished essays.

## Close Reading as Preparation for Writing

I appreciate Francine Prose's (2006) description of close reading as "reading like a writer." She explains, "I read more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed ... how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue" (p. 3). It's essential to model and teach strategies that focus students' attention on the content, craft, and structure of what they are reading—the close reading the Common Core standards call for. This serves two purposes: Students can draw on these insights to improve their own writing, and they can record observations and questions that will support them as they write an essay about this particular text. It's helpful to have students track their close reading by highlighting or notating their texts, such as marking key sentences with an arrow-shaped sticky note.

Prose (2006) suggests that we slow down our reading and examine each word, asking ourselves what kind of information each word is conveying. This process isn't practical for reading an entire novel, but it works well to require students to examine each word in a specific passage of a text with Prose's question in mind. To get them started, ask students to track specific types of words, such as proper nouns, adjectives, or verbs.

Teachers might also have students zero in on particular sentences. It's good to recognize well-crafted sentences that demand to be reread. Invite students to identify sentences they admire or particular kinds of sentences—such as those that appear to give advice or a lesson to the reader—and examine as a class how these sentences affect and inform the reader. This close reading not only supports analyzing theme, but also provides an opportunity to talk about how to select quotes in support of literary analysis.

Good writing teachers encourage students to generate and record questions as they read. These questions can be linked to categories of literary response, such as personal (What connections can I make to this text?); form/craft (What

techniques does the author use, and to what effect?); comparative (How does this text compare/contrast with other texts); or critical (Why does this text matter?). For example, one middle school teacher whose students were reading the short stories "Letter from the Fringe" by Joan Bauer and "Shortcut" by Nancy Werlin found that several students posed the question, What's the role of friendship in these stories? Some of her students later wrote an essay discussing similarities and differences in the role of friendship in the two stories, and others focused on how a personal experience with friendship connected with these readings.

Students must closely read mentor essays showing the kinds of writing we're asking them to do: literary, persuasive, and expository essays, as well as personal narrative. When I taught English language arts, I wrote model literary essays myself, on a different text from the one students were exploring, and shared these with students along with examples of good student-written literary essays. At first, I was intimidated to demonstrate my often messy thinking-and-writing process. But this very messiness enabled students to see that writing requires repeated trial and error, tenacity, and hard work. It is not about following a formula; it's about thinking, evidence, and audience.

## Developing an Authoritative Voice

Once close reading has started students thinking deeply, they need guidance to create a formula-free argument that draws from that thinking. Allow me to suggest ways to provide such guidance for a literary analysis assignment, drawing on my experience teaching secondary students.

### Low-Stakes Writing and Gathering Evidence

To write a literary analysis—to form an argument about a text and use evidence from the text to support that argument—students must develop higher-order thinking skills that support writing with purpose and authority. They must also write in an organized way. It's best to focus first on what students are trying to say (purpose and authority), then on organizational structure.

Give students opportunities to explore what they glean through their close reading with what Peter Elbow (1997) calls low-stakes writing, which helps students find their own language and warm up as writers. Such writing includes journal writing; writing in response to quotes a teacher provides—or that students choose—from a text they're focusing on; and writing in response to prompts connected to those texts. One teacher I work with created a routine for low-stakes writing. She asks students to develop a prompt relating to a common text, then she shares several students' prompts with the whole class and has everyone draft a quick response to one of these prompts. Low-stakes writing provides a starting point for finding and developing authoritative voice.

As students prepare to organize their thoughts on a text into an actual essay, ask them to revisit this low-stakes writing with a focus on answering the question, What do you want to prove? Students can list patterns or topics they find intriguing in the responsive writing and text notation they've already done. For instance, when my students read Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (Vintage, 1991), several noticed the pattern of poetry being woven throughout the text. Essay topics that connected to this included an analysis of the role of poetry in the book and an exploration of two examples of poems in the book.

### Moving from Question to Stand

With potential topics in mind, students return to their notes. Students use a different colored highlighter for each topic, marking sentences and quotes in their informal writing and notations within the text itself that connect to that topic and could provide evidence for it. The focus is on discovering what they can prove.

In support of that discovery, students frame a question or two that relates to their topic and evidence. At this point, instruct them to take a stand: "Consider your selected topics and questions and the evidence you have highlighted. Which of these questions can you answer with evidence to back you up? Does this 'stand' interest you as a reader and writer?"

My colleague, Kristi Latimer, avoids the term "thesis statement" during this process. Instead, have students focus on using evidence to develop a preliminary stand, which they use to test their evidence as they continue developing their argument. Considering the question, "Should Romeo and Juliet have married?" one of my students tried out the stand "Romeo and Juliet's marriage illustrates the tragedy of poor choices being made by young people in response to poor choices by related adults."

## Supporting Organization

Once students have chosen their supportable position, they start writing their evidence paragraphs. At this point, it's tempting to offer guidelines on how many paragraphs students should write. I know colleagues who intentionally require fewer than or more than three paragraphs to move students away from the formula. But this is yet another formula; it pulls the focus away from exploring evidence. Instead, here is where students take on the role of writing like a reader. As they look at their evidence and determine how they want to make their case, they ask themselves, "What do I want the reader to know about the stance I'm proving? What examples from the text help show this to the reader?" Encourage students to frequently stop to read over their work as they compose.

When teaching with this approach, teach minilessons in support of the decisions students will need to make as writers: how to frame authoritative sentences in their evidence paragraphs, how to use quotes to support their stance, and how to order their evidence paragraphs to make the strongest case. I had success inviting students to write each evidence paragraph as if it had to stand alone and then go back and determine how to order their evidence. This can lead students to discover that they need to order evidence paragraphs in a particular way because one or two of the paragraphs serve as a foundation for other paragraphs.

After developing and revising their evidence paragraphs, students draft introduction and conclusion paragraphs. They revisit their preliminary stand and frame it into an argument statement. This is the time to discuss strategies for drawing readers into their essay—the all-important lead. To help spark ideas, ask students to reread their draft essay with these questions in mind: What is your argument? How does it help readers see the text in a new way? What do you need to share with readers about this discovery? To draft the conclusion, you might have students consider the "so what" of their essay—why their argument matters.

Because I couldn't meet with each student individually, I created writing support groups. In the groups, students read their working drafts aloud and received peer feedback, which they used to revise their essays, with these elements in mind:

- Do you want to keep reading after the first paragraph? Why or why not? What is the author's argument (stand)?
- Focus on the author's evidence: Are there places where you agree with the author's argument? What is effective in these places? Where do you have questions or need more information?
- Are there arguments the author should consider adding?
- What evidence could you offer to challenge the author's stand?

## Expect Resistance

When I made this switch as a teacher, I found that students who'd learned to rely on the five-paragraph formula resisted letting go of it because of the thinking required by a formula-free approach. They often asked, "Come on, can't we just write five paragraphs?"

But as they persisted, they discovered they could write an essay that mattered to them and that added something new to the conversation about the book they were reading. They could write an essay in which the decisions they each made as readers and writers demonstrated their thinking and celebrated their authentic, authoritative voices.

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